

Our Two Great Gospel Sacraments: Baptism and the Eucharist

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I. Sacraments of the Gospel: Getting Our Bearings

A. Sacrament: Etymology

- As with words such as “Trinity,” “Incarnation,” and even “Bible,” the word “sacrament” is not found in Scripture. To be sure, you’ll find the church baptizing and breaking bread in Scripture right from the start, but you won’t find the apostles explicitly calling these actions sacraments. So where did we get this word, which is now so common?
- The Latin word *sacramentum*, or sacrament, was a military term used to describe the solemn oath of allegiance that a soldier pledged to his commander. The word made its way into the church’s vocabulary as early as the second century in the writings of Tertullian.
- *Sacramentum* then came into explicit biblical usage when Jerome used it to translate the Greek word *mysterion*, or mystery, in the first Latin translation of the Bible, the *Vulgate*. So the church has routinely used the word sacrament for the past 1,800 years—before the Reformation and after.

B. Sacrament: Scripture and Church Usage

- Among the longest standing and widest used definitions of the word sacrament comes from Augustine, who said a sacrament is “a visible form of an invisible grace.”
- Our Anglican Catechism expands on this definition: “A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. God gives us the sign as a means by which we receive that grace as a tangible assurance that we do in fact receive it.” ~*To Be A Christian*, 121, p. 55-56.



- In other words, a sacrament is a physical, material, tangible, touchable sign by which the Lord seals upon our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to strengthen and sustain our faith in his promises to us.
- **Romans 4:11** reads: “He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he still uncircumcised.”
- This language of sign and seal tells us something precious and profound about the two great gospel sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.
- As signs, the realities of water, bread, and wine *point* beyond themselves to the great redeeming accomplishments of Jesus Christ for us. And as seals, they *convey* to us the pledge—the strong and sure promise—of God’s graciousness to us in Jesus Christ.
- So the sacraments are primarily about God’s gracious action, about how God we receive God’s grace. In other words, Baptism and the Eucharist bestow and confirm the realities of the gospel by pointing us to Christ and binding us to him!

C. On Sign and Symbol

- Baptism and the Eucharist are surely signs, but not only in the way we often think of signs. They not like road signs, which merely point out the meaning of their referents at a distance. No, Baptism and the Eucharist are signs in the true, full sense of being symbols. For a symbol does not just point from one thing to another, but rather serves to join two things together (Note: *symbol* combines the Greek words “together” and “throw”).
- Baptism and the Eucharist are tangible, touchable—even testable!—signs that really and truly participate in the grand realities for which they stand.
- God uses Baptism and the Eucharist as means to communicate what they symbolize. In other words, God does not deceive us when he offers these sacramental gifts to us—they are not hollow and empty but full and bountiful, because these sacramental gifts really and truly bestow what they symbolize.

D. Jesus Christ: Source, Substance, and Goal of the Sacraments

- The sacraments should bring home to us with considerable force that God delights in using that which is physical and material to communicate salvation to humanity.
- This should strike us as wonderful and magnificent, but not as “out of the blue,” given that Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is the true meeting place (tabernacle/temple) of God and humanity, spirit and matter, invisible and visible. As Paul declares, Christ is the visible “icon” of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).



- Thus in the human Christ, who truly, really, and completely shares our creaturely existence, God comes to us and unites himself to us. Because Christ's death and resurrection seal all God's promises to us, what we know and experience through the sacraments is what we know and experience in Christ and his gospel! As such, the sacraments are means by which God fortifies and deepens our union with Christ. He, then, is the source, the substance, and the goal of the sacraments—that is, Jesus Christ is the quintessential sacrament. John Calvin put it like this:

“Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him.” ~John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.16.

- We joyfully confess—and rightly so!—that Christ alone is our salvation. And if Christ alone is our salvation, then what do we receive in the sacraments? Do we receive *something* more than Christ? *Something* less than Christ? *Something* other than Christ? No! We receive Christ himself! We receive Christ himself in yet another mode, as there is nothing in them that is not already in him. In other words, they are gospel sacraments, signs and seals of the salvation we have *in Christ*. Therefore:
 1. In Baptism we are united with Christ as we are plunged into his new humanity, human and divine, dead and risen, ascended and sitting at God's right hand.
 2. In the Eucharist we are fed, nourished, and fortified with Christ's glorious new humanity through the Spirit.

E. How Do the Sacraments Operate?

When we ask this question, we are seeking to clarify how God deepens and strengthens our union with Christ through Baptism and the Eucharist. This involves four crucial components:

1. Our union with Christ is fortified and deepened in the sacraments through the powerful yet “secret” working of the Holy Spirit.
2. Our union with Christ is fortified and deepened in the sacraments through the physical elements of water, bread, and wine.
3. Our union with Christ is fortified and deepened through the physical elements of water, bread, and wine when they are joined to the proclamation of Holy Scripture/the gospel.
4. Our union with Christ is fortified and deepened through the physical elements of water, bread, and wine when they are joined to the proclamation of Holy Scripture/the gospel and received through faith.



II. The Gospel Sacrament of Baptism

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.... For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you too must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:3-4, 10-11).

“Having been buried with Christ in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.... And you, who were dead in your trespasses...God made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses” (Colossians 2:12-13).

A. The Meaning of Baptism: Our Immersion into Christ and His Church

- Our Anglican Catechism states that baptism is the sign and seal of: “The inward and spiritual grace [of] death to sin and new birth to righteousness, through union with Christ in his death and resurrection.” ~*To Be A Christian*, 127, p. 57.
- Baptism pictures our death, burial, and resurrection in and with Jesus Christ, thus baptism is a profound and beautiful picture of our salvation—of our being immersed, included, literally incorporated—into Christ and all that he is for us.
- Baptism simultaneously signifies: 1) our union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection; 2) the washing away of our sins; and 3) our inclusion of our bodies into the body of Christ, such that we are individually members of the body of the church.
- Baptism answers the questions: *Who are we? And what does it mean to be saved?*
- Baptism is not *merely* a picture, but a symbol and seal of our being united with Christ as we are plunged into his new humanity. That is *precisely* why the Bible does not talk about Baptism as some well-intentioned Christians do—namely, as “an important step in our discipleship.” Rather, Scripture puts Baptism and salvation into the closest proximity (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21). Baptism is not a **suggestion** in Scripture, it is a **command** (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38).

III. The Gospel Sacrament of the Eucharist

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man, you have no life in you.... For my flesh is true food, and my blood true drink” (John 6:52-71).



“The cup which we bless, is it not our participation in the blood of Christ? And the bread which we break, is it not our participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16).

A. The Biblical Institution of the Eucharist

- Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:13-23.
- First Corinthians 11:23ff. Like Baptism, the Eucharist is not so much a suggestion as an assumption or command. It is an *identity marker* of the church, signifying to us and others that we are truly and really the body of Jesus Christ.
- The foreshadowing of the Eucharist in the Hebrew Scriptures is striking and distinctive: Note the parallels with Exodus 12. Jesus institutes the Supper at the Passover meal! He is the perfect lamb, whose blood is efficacious to deliver and preserve God’s people, and whose flesh is eaten. What is more, this is an eschatological feast: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

B. The Meaning of the Eucharist

- The Eucharist gives us a vivid picture of our union with Jesus Christ. Note well: Jesus did not give us a wooden cross, nails, or a crown of thorns by which to remember him. And if that was his primary objective, it seems that such things would do a better job. But instead, he gives us bread and wine, and tells us to eat and drink his flesh and blood. Why? That we might all the better grasp in what—or better, in whom—we participate! This is a stunning picture of our *salvation*, by which God reminds us time and again that we are partakers of the crucified, resurrected Jesus Christ. Much like Baptism, the Eucharist helps us understand what—or better, who—our salvation *is*.
- The Eucharist is the visible word of God—that is, the gospel in tangible (touch-able, smell-able, taste-able form). In the Eucharist, then, we are continually nourished and fortified by Christ, just as we are in the preaching of the gospel.
- The Eucharist is the sign and seal of our partaking of/our participation in Christ, for it is only as we partake of Christ himself that we receive Christ’s benefits (**thus John 6:52-71 and 1 Corinthians 10:16**).
- The Eucharist is the sign and seal of the union of believers in one body (1 Corinthians 10:17-18). Just as all believers partake of the one body and blood of Jesus Christ, they are consequently conformed more and more to the body of Christ. In other words, the Eucharist tells the church whose she is, and therefore who she is.



- **The Eucharist brings us terrific comfort and consolation.** “This is who you are! This is what happened to you! You really do share in Jesus Christ, and all that is his!”

C. The Gospel in Our Hands, in Our Mouths, in Our Bellies

- In the Eucharist we ***really and truly*** receive Jesus Christ in the totality of his reality, the One in whom the whole fullness of God dwells bodily. In other words, we joyfully confess that as the Spirit seizes on the elements of the bread and wine, believers are drawn up to heaven, that we may feed on Christ in our hearts by faith, with thanksgiving!
- “Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.” ~“Prayer of Humble Access,” *Book of Common Prayer*, 119.
- “Almighty and everliving God, we thank you for feeding us, in these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious body and blood of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; and for assuring us, through this sacrament, of your favor and goodness towards us: that we are true members of the mystical body of your Son, the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs, through hope, of your everlasting kingdom.” ~“Post Communion Prayer,” *Book of Common Prayer*, 121.
- The Eucharist involves our truly receiving Christ precisely because salvation involves our truly receiving Christ:

~Did we truly receive Christ in order to be saved? Yes.

~By what means? By the gospel through faith.

~By what power? By the power of God the Holy Spirit.

~On all accounts, the same is true of the gospel as of the Eucharist, precisely because the Eucharist is a sacrament of the gospel!

~How we view the Eucharist says a great deal about how we view salvation more generally! For what one thinks/says about the Eucharist is highly indicative of what we will think/say about salvation otherwise—and vice versa, of course!